

Cherwell District Council

Executive

4 September 2017

Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2018-2019

Report of Chief Finance Officer

This report is public

Purpose of report

To provide members with an update on the current Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) and the changes to discounts, including the impact on collection rates, and to provide members with options to consider for a Council Tax Reduction Scheme for 2018-2019 and to seek approval to consult on the approved option.

1.0 Recommendations

The Executive is recommended:

- 1.1 To note the contents of the report and any financial implications for the Council.
- 1.2 To approve the recommendation made by Budget Planning Committee to consult on Option 1 – no change to the current Council Tax Reduction Scheme or Council Tax discounts for 2018-2019 and to change only the detail of the scheme to update the Pensioner Regulations as prescribed by DCLG and to update the Working Age Regulations amounts in line with Housing Benefit.

2.0 Introduction

- 2.1 Council Tax Benefit was abolished in April 2013 and replaced by a locally approved Council Tax Reduction Scheme. In December 2016 members approved a Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) for Cherwell District Council for the financial year 2017-2018. The scheme remained the same as in 2016-2017 and mirrored the previous Council Tax Benefit scheme.
- 2.2 The scheme for pensioners is set nationally and pensioners have not seen any change to the support they receive. However Cherwell District Council can design its own scheme for working age customers.
- 2.3 The Council Tax Reduction scheme is based on a fixed cash grant based on approximately 90% of the previous Council Tax Benefit subsidy giving a funding shortfall for Cherwell of £742,430
- 2.4 The funding shortfall is mostly offset by the changes to locally set Council Tax Discounts.

3.0 Report Details

Position so far

Council Tax Reduction Scheme

- 3.1 As the funding for CTRS is a fixed cash grant the cost of any increase in the level of demand will be borne by the Council. The Council Tax Reduction caseload has been monitored and there has been a small decrease in the number of live cases from 7193 in July 2016 to 7087 in July 2017.

Impact on Parish Councils

- 3.2 Members may recall that the regulations for calculating the Council Tax Base were amended to reflect the Council Tax Reduction Scheme and had the affect of reducing the tax base for the billing authority, major preceptors and the Police and Crime Commissioner for Thames Valley and local preceptors. This is because Council Tax Reduction is a discount rather than a benefit and therefore we do not collect the full amount of Council Tax from tax payers who qualify for Council Tax Reduction. The impact of the reduced tax base was mitigated in part by changes made to discounts and exemptions. The Council passports a grant to parish councils to mitigate the impact on them.

Impact of the changes to discounts and exemptions

- 3.4 Members will also recall that the Local Government Finance Act 2012 abolished certain exemptions with effect from 1 April 2013 and replaced them with discounts which can be determined locally.
- 3.5 Council determined that furnished chargeable dwellings that are not the sole or main residence of an individual (i.e. second homes) should no longer receive a discount. They had previously received a discount of 10%. If we continue to set the discount at zero it is estimated that this will result in additional income of £82,321 for the 2018-2019 financial year.
- 3.6 Council also determined that the discount in respect of unoccupied and substantially unfurnished properties should be reduced to 25% for a period of six months and thereafter to zero. This will result in additional income of £289,375.
- 3.7 Council further exercised its discretion to determine that chargeable dwellings which are vacant and undergoing major repair work to render them habitable should be given a discount of 25% for a period of 12 months. This is expected to result in additional income of £21,403.
- 3.8 Prior to 1 April 2013 billing authorities could charge up to a maximum of 100% council tax on dwellings that have been empty for more than 2 years. From April 2013 powers were given to local authorities to charge a premium of up to 50% of the council tax payable. The projected additional income from charging an Empty Homes Premium is £109,347. If this causes more long term empty properties to be brought back into use it will have a beneficial impact on New Homes Bonus.

Impact of Council Tax Reduction Scheme on collection rates

A council tax collection rate of 98.35% was achieved for 2016-2017 against the target of 98.25%. Collection rates for the first two months of the 2017-2018 are on target. In considering the Council Tax Reduction Scheme for 2018-2019 members should be mindful that any changes to the scheme that reduce entitlement to CTRS could have an adverse impact on collection rates and cost of collection.

Universal Credit

Universal Credit Full Digital Service will go live in Oxford in October 2017 and Banbury in November 2017 therefore impacting on residents in the Cherwell area. Minor amendments may be considered to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme Regulations to reflect the calculation of Council Tax Reduction for residents in receipt of Universal Credit.

Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2017-2018

- 3.9 Members will be aware that the national 10% reduction in government funding for Council Tax Reduction Schemes over the last four has been offset by the additional income generated by changes to discounts.

The Government has not yet released indicative figures for 2018-2019. For the purposes of calculating the new Council Tax Reduction scheme for 2018-2019 an assumption has been made that funding will reduce again by 10%

- 3.10 Financial modelling on the options for a new scheme for 2018-2019 has been undertaken as shown below:

Options

Option 1 – No change to current local Council Tax Reduction scheme or Council Tax discounts and amending the Regulations for changes announced in the Budget

The 'change nothing' approach would mean retaining the current Council Tax Reduction Scheme. The only changes required would be to the detail of the scheme and updating the Regulations. The shortfall in funding would be offset, in part, by the changes made to discounts in Council Tax.

Option 2 – Revised Council Tax Reduction scheme with current council tax Discounts

This option could include reducing support for working age people and would mean that all working age claimants would have to pay a percentage of their council tax liability regardless of their circumstances. Percentage reductions of 8.5%, 10%, 15% and 20% have been modelled.

Financial Summary of options

	100%	91.5%	90%	85%	80%
	£	£	£	£	£
Overall funding loss	742,430	742,430	742,430	742,430	742,430
Second homes income	-82,321	-82,321	-82,321	-82,321	-82,321
Empty homes discount of 25% for up to 6 months; no change in policy since 2013 so no additional income	-289,375	-289,375	-289,375	-289,375	-289,375
Uninhabitable homes discount of 25% for 12 months	-21,403	-21,403	-21,403	-21,403	-21,403
Long term empty premium	-109,347	-109,347	-109,347	-109,347	-109,347
Reduction in expenditure based on % liability	0	-352,896	-415,171	-622,757	-830,343
Total funding gap (+)/additional income (-)	239,984	-112,912	-175,188	-382,773	-590,359
Funding gap (+)/additional income (-) for CDC	16,799	-7,904	-12,263	-26,794	-41,325

4.0 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

- 4.1 From April 2013 Council Tax Benefit was abolished and replaced with a local Council Tax Reduction Scheme.
- 4.2 Members are now required to agree for consultation purposes a Council Tax Reduction Scheme for the 2018-2019 financial year.

5.0 Consultation

There is a requirement to consult with the public, major preceptors and other parties who may have an interest in the Council Tax Reduction Scheme. In October 2014 a Supreme Court judgement ruled that consultation must be not only on the preferred option but also on all other potential options such as reducing council services and raising council tax.

6.0 Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection

- 6.1 The following alternative options have been identified and rejected for the reasons as set out below.

Option 1: To not recommend any of the options for a scheme for 2018-2019. This would have financial implications for the Council and those residents affected by Welfare Reform.

7.0 Implications

Financial and Resource Implications

7.1 See table contained in this report – section 3.10.

Comments checked by:

Paul Sutton, Chief Finance Officer, Paul.sutton@cherwellandsouthnorthants.gov.uk

Legal Implications

7.2 The Council is required to approve a Council Tax Reduction Scheme on an annual basis. Failure to do so will adversely affect the reputation of the Council and will have a financial implication for residents.

Comments checked by:

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8.0 Decision Information

Key Decision

Financial Threshold Met: Not applicable

Community Impact Threshold Met: Not applicable

Wards Affected

All

Links to Corporate Plan and Policy Framework

This links to the Council's priorities of a district of opportunity and sound budgets and a customer focused council

Lead Councillor

Councillor Tony Ilott Lead Member for Financial Management

Document Information

Appendix No	Title
None	
Background Papers	
None	
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